

Unashamed integrity: Stephen Sykes and the ‘crisis’ of Anglican ecclesiology and identity

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Stephen Sykes’s *Integrity of Anglicanism* was published in 1978, and had a convulsive effect on discussions of Anglican identity and ecclesiology. In prose that was spare and sometimes biting, it laid into a common Anglican apologetic style that had trumpeted the virtue of Anglican ‘comprehensiveness’ and had claimed a unique ecumenical advantage for the Anglican churches as a ‘bridge’ between Protestantism and Catholicism. Much of this traditional Anglican apologetic Sykes found muddled and complacent, and he appealed to Anglicans to take systematic theology seriously, and to attempt to articulate exactly what was distinctive about Anglican doctrine, and especially the Anglican doctrine of the Church. Appearing as it did in good time for the Lambeth Conference of 1978, the *Integrity of Anglicanism* sharply divided opinion, both then and since.¹ This article is an attempt to re-read the book, and through it to re-evaluate Sykes’s view of Anglican identity. To do that it is necessary to broaden the analysis to encompass the whole context of Sykes’s life and work, including both his earlier work on Schleiermacher, and his later years writing as a bishop and as chairman of the Doctrine Commission. What emerges from this re-reading is an assessment of Anglicanism, I would argue, marked by four main emphases: first, an attempt to clarify the method and content of the ‘essence of Christianity’, with its

¹ Sykes’s own diary of the 1978 Lambeth Conference at several points attests to the controversy the book caused; for example, of his first meeting with the other theological consultants, on the first day, he wrote: ‘Various remarks were made to me about my book. Hugh Melinsky says that he’s very angry – which he should be since it is unquestionably his kind of [‘theory’ crossed out] position which I find so infuriating’; S.W. Sykes, mss. diary of the Lambeth Conference 1978, currently in the possession of Dr M. Guite; I am hoping to publish this diary with annotations in the future.

implications for Anglicanism; second, a profound reflection on doctrine as ecclesial practice; third, a related preoccupation with conflict and power in Christian history; and fourth, a great affection for, and deep learning in, the riches of the Anglican theological tradition. These are, of course, not the only themes that could emerge from a review of Sykes's theological writing: others that can only be alluded to here include his anatomy of theological liberalism, his ecumenical commitments, and his reflections on the nature ecclesiastical authority.

The article falls into three main parts. First, it attempts to outline where I think 'Anglican identity', or rather Anglicanism as theologically conceived, had got to by the third quarter of the twentieth century, in order, second, to explore Sykes's critique in a little more detail and assess the damage it inflicted on that well-established view. And then, third, I shall in turn develop a critique of Sykes's articulation of Anglicanism, pointing out briefly where a fault-line opens up on closer inspection. In an all-too-brief conclusion I shall try to repair that fault-line, and suggest that Sykes himself later in life seems to have been moving towards a more historically-contingent view that implicitly stepped back somewhat from the bracing position of *The Integrity of Anglicanism*.

1: Anglicanism and Anglican identity in the mid-twentieth century²

In that book Sykes refers several times to a 'crisis' in Anglicanism, seeing it principally as a theological problem, bearing on a specific tradition of Anglican self-

² This section draws at several points on my discussion of the historiography of Anglicanism in chapter 1, 'The Historiography of Anglicanism' in J. Morris (ed.), *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, IV: Global Western Anglicanism, c.1910 – present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-21.

understanding which, broadly, he labels as ‘comprehensiveness’. The first substantial chapter was actually titled ‘The crisis of Anglican comprehensiveness’. But rather than expound Sykes’s view first, and examine what he thought the nature of this ‘crisis’ might be, it is helpful to remind ourselves of just what passed for Anglican apologetic in the middle of the twentieth century. Three books appeared in the early 1960s that can stand as a convenient point of reference, William Wand’s *Anglicanism in History and Today* (1961), Charles Stranks’s *Anglican Devotion* (1961), and perhaps also Martin Thornton’s *English Spirituality* (1963). Wand’s book is a historical survey of the Anglican Communion, and of its contemporary features and functions. It is heavily Anglocentric, moderately Anglo-Catholic in sympathy, and completely in thrall to the perspective on Anglicanism Sykes was to dissect so effectively in *The Integrity of Anglicanism*. An anonymous reviewer in the *Church Times* captured its spirit: ‘The approach is typically Anglican in the constant appeal to history: the temper and outlook of the writer are no less recognisably Anglican, being always calm, moderate, eirenic and magisterially judicious.’³ For Wand, there were four main emphases in the Anglican way of faith: comprehensiveness (‘an essential trait of Anglicanism...[which] prevents dogmatic precision...[and] is a field for the amateur rather than a bastion for the professional theologian’), continuity with the early Church, Biblicism (or the Reformation influence), and – perhaps surprisingly, to contemporary eyes – nationalism.⁴ Stranks’s view was of a piece with this. Anglican devotion was typified by a ‘catholicity of spirit’, by a ‘temper of mind’, by a ‘balance between the claims of emotion and reason’, by a refusal to let one side of religion be stressed to the neglect of another, by restraint, by dignity, by ‘the fusion of fact and feeling which characterises the Book of Common Prayer’, and so on and so

³ *Church Times*, 17 November 1961.

⁴ J.W. C. Wand, *Anglicanism in History and Today* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1961), pp. 47-8.

forth.⁵ Thornton's historical survey of English ascetical theology, though broader in scope and rooted in Patristic and medieval sources, nonetheless ended with a discussion of contemporary spiritual needs which exactly fitted this same broad perspective, hinging on an 'English temperament' of moderation and restraint, adapted to an ascetical theology that could supply a suitable framework for Anglican spiritual guidance (and note that the contemporary application, in the final chapter, is expressed almost exclusively as 'Anglican', implying once again an uncritical conflation of Englishness and Anglicanism).⁶

In these writers, and in others, Anglicanism was essentially non-dogmatic, moderate in temper, Patristic in content but Reformed in its view of Biblical authority, balanced and reasonable. Without always saying it explicitly, their broad understanding was that Anglicanism was distinguished not only by its retention of Catholic order with Protestant faith, but by its refusal to assert any Christian doctrines as authoritative other than those professed by the early Church. These were essentially popular presentations of Anglicanism. There were others of greater scholarly weight and influence. Stephen Neill's *Penguin Anglicanism* (1958, but reprinted many times), for example, was a more nuanced reading of the growth and complexity of the Anglican Communion, as you would expect from someone who had spent over twenty years as a missionary in India and then worked for the World Council of Churches.⁷ You could not think that Neill would make the fatally easy conflation of the spirit of worldwide Anglicanism and English restraint and moderation that some of his peers did. Nonetheless it is Neill who, I suspect, trying to answer the question 'What is

⁵ C.J. Stranks, *Anglican Devotion* (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 270-5.

⁶ M. Thornton, *English Spirituality: An Outline of Ascetical Theology according to the English Pastoral Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1963), pp. 55-7 & 291-302.

⁷ W.O. Chadwick, 'Stephen Neill (1900-1984)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

Anglicanism?', provided Stephen Sykes with his launch pad for *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, for Neill says 'there are no special Anglican theological doctrines, there is no particular Anglican theology', asserts that the Church of England is only the Church *in* England, for it teaches 'all the doctrines of the Catholic Faith', and again emphasizes the comprehensiveness of the Anglican way of faith.⁸ Or again, Paul More and Frank Cross, in their compendium of passages from Anglican writers of the seventeenth century, published a decade earlier, at least to judge from More's introductory essay, highlighted the same essential themes of balance, of restraint, of moderation, of refusal to pass beyond certain core doctrines, as typical of the Anglicanism not only of the seventeenth century but of the present: More emphasized the *via media*, a 'just balance between fundamentals and accessories', a characteristic pragmatism, and so on.⁹ Henry McAdoo was another such authority, whose *Spirit of Anglicanism* (1965) trod much the same ground as More and Cross in discerning in the middle way of seventeenth-century Anglicanism a template for the present.¹⁰

Wand, Stranks, Thornton, More and Cross, McAdoo, and even Neill in a more muted way, were writing out of a perspective in which the Church of England, its history, its order, its liturgy and its theology, absolutely dominated the account Anglican church leaders commonly gave of their denominational tradition. Most of them were written during, or shortly after, the post-war 'Indian Summer' of British Christianity, when the British churches, and especially Anglicanism, experienced what some historians have even called a

⁸ S.C. Neill, *Anglicanism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), pp. 417 & 426.

⁹ P.E. More & F.L. Cross, *Anglicanism. The Thought and Practice of the Church of England, illustrated from the Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (London: SPCK, 1951), pp. xxxii-xxxiii.

¹⁰ H.R. McAdoo, *The Spirit of Anglicanism. A Survey of Anglican Theological Method in the Seventeenth Century* (London: A & C Black, 1965); see especially pp. v-vii.

last ‘religious revival’, before the rapid contraction of the mid-1960s on.¹¹ It is perhaps hardly surprising that this Anglican apologetic appears complacent from the perspective of today. Before moving on to Sykes’s critique of this way of thinking, it is probably important to provide a little context, albeit necessarily brief. If all of these accounts, taken together, give the sense of a certain timelessness - a frozen or fossilized quality - of Anglican apologetic, that is perhaps understandable given that almost all the senior clergy of the colonial and dominion churches, including many of those in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, but especially in Africa and large parts of Asia, were British Anglicans until decolonization, and even a little beyond in many places. The charismatic movement was in its infancy in Britain and other parts of the Anglican Communion. The growing strength of Pentecostal Christianity in the global south was scarcely noticed by these writers. Few forecast the immense shift in Anglican self-perception that would be forced on the Communion by the rapid growth of global south Anglicanism in the last quarter of the century, by growing internal conflict in the 1980s and 1990s, and by the resulting rebalancing of ecclesial power that writers such as Miranda Hassett and Philip Jenkins have described, and that Johnston and Chung famously characterised as the changing ‘Statistical Centre of Gravity’ of world Christianity.¹² Some, such as Leslie Brown, the last white Archbishop of Uganda, were convinced that decolonization would require the wholesale transformation of the leadership of the African churches; but you can scour through his fascinating

¹¹ For example, C.D. Field, *Britain’s Last Religious Revival: Quantifying Belonging, Behaving, and Believing in the Long 1950s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹² M.K. Hassett, *Anglican Communion in Crisis: How Episcopal Dissidents and their African Allies are Reshaping Anglicanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); T.M. Johnston & S.Y. Chung, ‘Tracking Global Christianity’s Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD33-AD2100’, *International Review of Mission*, 93 (2004), pp. 166-81.

autobiography, *Three Worlds: One Word* (1981), in vain for an apprehension of the coming transformation of relationships and authority in the worldwide Communion.¹³ That is not to attribute blame, but simply to acknowledge a natural lack of foreknowledge. Likewise, none of these authors began to grapple with the profound challenges of post-colonial theory, and its associated contextualized theological critiques, with all their implications for the way Anglicans would begin to see each other.

2: Stephen Sykes on Anglicanism

Likewise Sykes himself, to judge from his published writing, had little sense of this until long after he had written *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, and effectively placed a bomb under the tradition of Anglican apologetic I have described. In using the word ‘crisis’ there, by my reading he had in mind not what actually has happened, namely a revolution in worldwide Anglicanism engineered by the global transformation of Anglican membership and ministry, with all its attendant economic and social upheaval, but rather a theological crisis, a ‘crisis of belief’ that was theologian-led, or even Cambridge-led. For the very point of exposing the weakness of the principle of comprehensiveness was to draw attention to the threat of an extreme theological liberalism illustrated in the work of some of Sykes’s older colleagues and contemporaries: analysis of the ‘contemporary crisis’ into which use of the word ‘comprehensiveness’ had fallen would entail studying ‘the major reason for the crisis, which is’, he said, ‘clearly enough, the theological activities of those whose writings nowadays cause the same kind of offence as that given by Barnes’ *Rise of Christianity*’.¹⁴

¹³ L. Brown, *Three Worlds: One Word. Account of a Mission* (London: Rex Collings, 1981).

¹⁴ S.W. Sykes, *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1978), p. 4.

Later, in the introduction to *Unashamed Anglicanism* (1995), he would repeat this point: from the mid-1960s, coincident with the opening of the Anglican-Roman Catholic international dialogue, he said, Anglicanism began to experience ‘the symptoms of a failure of nerve about its own identity’ as the published work of theologians such as Maurice Wiles, John Robinson, Geoffrey Lampe, and Don Cupitt (all Cambridge-based) ‘appeared to throw into question [Anglicanism’s] very participation in the development of a central ecumenical consensus’.¹⁵ As he went on to ask, ‘Was the long-honoured tradition of comprehensiveness now to include a ‘liberalism’, ‘modernism’ or ‘radicalism’ which denied or held in doubt the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation, and even of the classic doctrine of God?’¹⁶

From the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the telling thing is that the very phenomenon which Sykes identified as a ‘crisis’ of belief for Anglicanism in the 1960s and 1970s, actually ceased to be a major challenge for Anglican theology in the 1990s and 2000s, partly as a result of Sykes’s work. The moment of this ‘second modernism’ passed, quite quickly. If the episcopate of David Jenkins can stand in some people’s minds – a little unfairly – as a high water mark of this new wave of Anglican radicalism, the fact of the matter is that radical questioning of traditional Christology and Trinitarian belief lost its appeal, in the face of a vigorous counter-assault from an orthodox Trinitarian theology, and from the resurgence of Anglican Evangelicalism.¹⁷ But again that is to get ahead of the

¹⁵ S.W. Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism* (London: DLT, 1995), pp. xiii-xiv.

¹⁶ Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, p. xvi.

¹⁷ The *Guardian* newspaper ran a piece by Andrew Brown, after Jenkins’s death, under the heading ‘David Jenkins: the bishop who didn’t believe in the Bible’, 6 September 2016, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/06/david-jenkins-bishop-durham-biblical-facts-fire-york-minster>.

argument. The point here is simply this. In order to understand just what *The Integrity of Anglicanism* was really attempting to do, we have to think back beyond the current internal turmoil of the Anglican Communion, beyond the fractious nature of discussion around human sexuality and women's ministry (not that conflict on these things was absent in the 1970s), and beyond the current construal of Anglican 'crisis', in other words, to a very different set of preoccupations.

If we take the tradition of Anglican apologetic I have described, and put up against it the force of criticism of traditional Christology encountered in, for example, Maurice Wiles's *Making of Christian Doctrine* (1967) and *Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (1974), or the John Hick-edited *Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), that is the collision which Sykes sought to address, in clear defence of the very Anglican tradition of theology and spirituality which some might have thought he was undermining. His target was not, first and foremost, Anglican woolly-mindedness, though he was trenchant enough in his comments on that, but the consequences of a theological liberalism which has been brilliantly anatomized in a recent PhD by Sam Brewitt-Taylor.¹⁸ The scope and content of the *Integrity of Anglicanism* really started from that point. 'Comprehensiveness' was at fault, not as a simple assertion of the presence of contrasting or even competing sets of convictions within one church (which is, after all, commonly true of most churches), but as a convincing theological defence of that church. In the face of theological speculation which seemed to cut at the very roots of the

¹⁸ S. Brewitt-Taylor, 'Christian Radicalism' in the Church of England, 1957-70', Oxford University DPhil. thesis, 2012; though see J.N. Morris, 'Enemy within? The appeal of the discipline of sociology to religious professionals in postwar Britain', in *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 9 (2016), pp. 177-200, for a critique of Brewitt-Taylor's assumption that the theorizing of secularization had little impact on Anglicanism before the late 1950s.

Gospel, Anglicans could not simply shrug their shoulders and pretend that their ecclesial system, their identity and beliefs, were pliant enough to absorb the shock. If all one could say of Anglicanism was that it had ‘no special doctrines of its own’, what could one say to an attack on core doctrine? If what Anglicans held as fundamental was the Catholic Christianity of the first five centuries – as for example John Jewel had argued in his *Apology of the Church of England* (1562) - how did one tackle doubt or plain denial of those central doctrines of the faith? What doctrinal standard, what sources and norms, could Anglicans fall back on to assert the essential identity of their church? And then, by what authority could Anglicans uphold and defend that essential identity? All the main elements of Sykes’s argument in *The Integrity of Anglicanism* follow, then, from his engagement with the effects of this second wave of Anglican modernism – something easily missed perhaps because, in his respect for his colleagues, he generally eschewed polemics, and indeed anything that might pass for criticism of friends and colleagues. Nonetheless, the passionate Anglicanism is there underneath it all without question. As Fergus Kerr said, ‘A Church that calls forth this kind of attack on it from one of its members is a Church that a man loves and cares for. None of the bland, congratulatory portraits of the Church of England by Wand, Garbett and others, has ever shown me, as Sykes has done in this book, why Anglicanism matters.’¹⁹ Sykes’s position is summed up in the words that conclude the chapter on ‘The Anglican standpoint’:

[T]he Anglican church, which has developed, under the impact of modern liberal theology, a breadth of doctrinal tolerance of doubt and internal contradiction unparalleled by that of other episcopal churches, has an urgent responsibility to articulate what it stands for as an institution in its liturgy and canon law, and to subject that content to rigorous criticism. This process will in the first instance reveal the

¹⁹ F. Kerr, review, *New Blackfriars*, 60 (1979), p. 396.

incontrovertible fact that there exist doctrines repeatedly affirmed by all parts of its liturgical tradition, including its most modern additions.²⁰

The point of attacking comprehensiveness and the ‘no special doctrines’ view was precisely to call forth a robust defence of Anglican identity: Anglicans did have a distinct position, illustrated not only in their formularies, but also in their public worship, canon law, and indeed in the practices and operative norms by which they conducted their business. Anglicans should articulate more forcefully the common theology of their public worship. Paul Avis has argued convincingly that the ‘no special doctrines’ view criticized by Sykes was never intended – at least in the hands of Ramsey and others – to deny the differences between the doctrine professed by the Anglican Reformers, for example, and the Catholic Church from which they broke away, though it was also reticent in describing decisively just what Anglicans did assert of their own position, especially on order.²¹ To that extent, Sykes perhaps over-egged the criticism, though its starting point was nonetheless just. As Sykes argued, Anglicans ought to overcome their reticence: they ought to call upon the methods and example of systematic theology, and its critical tradition, in order to explicate and refine the account they offered of their beliefs. To see where this argument led, one has to move forwards in Sykes’s work. Sykes’s ordination as bishop changed the context of his work. The gist of *The Integrity of Anglicanism* was not that Sykes himself, or indeed anyone else, ought necessarily to attempt the construction of a systematic Anglican theology, but rather use systematic theology critically to expound and refine Anglican apologetic. Where we can now see, in retrospect, Sykes doing that is in his work as a bishop-theologian for the Church

²⁰ Sykes, *Integrity*, p. 51.

²¹ P.D. Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism. Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 41-4.

of England, and especially on the Doctrine Commission. His introduction to the republication of three ‘doctrine classics’ (*We believe in God*, *We believe in the Holy Spirit*, and *The Mystery of Salvation*) is a good illustration of the position for which he was arguing in *The Integrity of Anglicanism*. Acknowledging that these reports were written ‘by people for whom the practice of the faith was a matter of vital concern’, he asserted that these were documents ‘with a pastoral concern’, taking the ‘spiritual life and participation in the worship of the Church’ as reference points as well as the arguments of theologians.²² Thus they taught the faith ‘from within the Church of England, attempting to discern a faithful and true pathway for the contemporary disciple’.²³ But in this they marked a definite departure from the work of the Commission in the 1970s and early 80s, when successive reports such as *Christian Believing* (1976), registering the impact of historical criticism, had largely avoided making collective statements on behalf of the whole Church. In this, they were simply registering the anti-Trinitarian criticism of theologians such as van Buren, Hick, and Lampe.²⁴ Sykes described the work of the Commission from the mid-1980s as a ‘turn towards the content of belief’, and situated it in the growing interest in systematic theology prompted by, for example, the influence of the English translation of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*.²⁵ The three republished reports had marked a return to the notion of a ‘core of common teaching’, reflecting a ‘critical realism’ that was a definite turn away from the position of Cupitt and others, and which assumed the ‘practical, non-speculative nature of Trinitarian theology’ as their starting point.²⁶ For Sykes, incidentally, the Church of

²² Doctrine Commission of the Church of England, *Contemporary Doctrine Classics from the Church of England* (London: CHP, 2005), p. xv.

²³ *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, p. xvi.

²⁴ *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, pp. xx-xxi.

²⁵ *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, pp. xvi-xvii.

²⁶ *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, p. xxiii.

England's ecumenical commitment was an important element of this repristination of a Church theology: the Trinitarianism of the reports published from 1987 signified its 'wholehearted participation in the ecumenical movement'.²⁷ Though it's not possible to assess how much of *Being Human* (2003) was actually written by Sykes himself, still as a whole the report built on and continued the 'turn towards the content [and implications] of belief' evident in the earlier reports.

The Integrity of Anglicanism, and the articles and papers he collected together in *Unashamed Anglicanism*, together made conventional Anglican apologetic untenable. Anglicans had a distinctive position of their own. It was one expressed in their liturgy, in their canon law, and in their church structures and practice, as well as in the more formal mode of theological discourse, in the Articles and Homilies, and in the various reports by which the Church of England, and other Anglican churches, expressed its mind on various matters. There's no sign Sykes thought that this distinctive position was either a closed and unchanging one, or an internally coherent unity, or indeed was one that could be readily identified on each and every occasion when it might be sought out. It was not, then, something to be uncovered or revealed, as if it had lain hidden for centuries. But nor was it incapable of development. That is one of the reasons why Richard Roberts's criticism of Sykes's position as regressive goes too far.²⁸ Roberts suggested that underlying Sykes's *Integrity of Anglicanism* and his *Identity of Christianity* was a 'sub-text' elaborating 'a theory

²⁷ *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, p. xxv.

²⁸ R. H. Roberts, 'Lord, Bondsman and Churchman: Identity, Integrity and Power in Anglicanism', in C.E. Gunton & D.W. Hardy (eds.), *On Being the Church. Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), pp. 156-224.

of theological power'.²⁹ According to Roberts, by asserting the importance of the liturgy and canon law as, effectively, means through which the doctrine of Anglicanism was expressed, and by which 'matters concerning the faith might be judged', Sykes was reducing the role of the 'whole people of God' to one of 'passive receptivity over against the agency of the donor'.³⁰ But Sykes did not deny freedom of opinion in the Church, nor seek to impose arbitrary limits on debate, nor support the elevation of episcopal authority in order to control lay views. His theological argument was just that – an *argument* he thought was neglected and which he certainly expected to be encountered robustly and critically, and which was needed to counter what he evidently thought was itself the implicit arrogance of colleagues whose theological positions seemingly undermined the faith of the Church. In effect, he was arguing for a theology 'in service of the Church': the freedom of the theologian to challenge and question received doctrine could not simply be allowed to obliterate the content of belief without being tested, refined and qualified in use, in ecclesial practice. And if my use of the word 'allowed' just now might seem to raise the shadow of clerical authoritarianism (which I think is what Roberts and perhaps others assumed), with a hierarchy asserting its power to refuse, not only is that not what the argument actually implied, but the prospect of a particular theologian taking upon himself or herself the assumed power to change the faith of the Church was equally, if not more, problematic. Recognition of that is partly what interested Sykes in Newman's *Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church* (1836), extended in his Preface to the lectures when republished as the *Via Media of the Anglican Church* (1877).³¹

²⁹ Roberts, 'Lord, Bondsman and Churchman', p. 157.

³⁰ Roberts, 'Lord, Bondsman and Churchman', pp. 181-2.

³¹ A separate essay could be written on Sykes's interest in Newman. It involved, so far as I can see, a relatively restricted range of texts, but it encompassed some of Newman's most creative work, especially the *Prophetic Office* and the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. See, for example, S.W. Sykes, *The*

The Church did need theologians; it needed the force of criticism; it could be progressive rather than regressive. Anglicans therefore needed to take systematic theology seriously, and learn how to articulate the theological position they undoubtedly occupied. They needed to study their own ecclesiological convictions above all – hence Sykes’s appreciation for Paul Avis’s *Anglicanism and the Christian Church* (1989).³² Pace Roberts, what Sykes envisaged was not an autocratic identity of power with authority, but a genuinely Pauline vision of the Church of England as one but many-membered: his approval of Lambeth 1948’s conception of authority as *dispersed*, was intended to reflect the unity of the ‘single Divine source’ of authority and its distribution amongst the formularies, institutions, offices and membership of the Church of England.³³

3: A critique

Nonetheless, Sykes’s position is not without its difficulties, and in the final section of this paper I want to offer a brief critical review. The chief difficulty is not a conflation of power and authority. I can see the plausibility of that as a ‘reading’ of elements or tendencies in Sykes’s work, but that charge is a speculative construction of an argument’s tendency drawing its first step from an assumed link in Anglican theology between a ‘progressive

Identity of Christianity. Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 102-22.

³² Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, p. 126; cf. P. Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church: Theological Resources in Historical Perspective* (1989; 2nd edition, London and New York: T&T Clark, 2002)..

³³ He calls it by far ‘the most considerable statement on authority in Anglicanism to be found in official Anglican documentation’: Sykes, *Integrity*, p. 87, and added the whole statement itself as an appendix at pp. 112-4. Arguably, Sykes’s position on church authority (echoing that of the 1948 statement) demonstrates some affinity with Newman’s celebrated *Rambler* article ‘On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine’.

kenosis in the doctrine of the Incarnation’ and a corresponding ‘*plerosis* in the doctrine of the ordained ministry’ that is historically misconceived, and as such fails as a description of trends in Anglican theology since the mid-nineteenth century.³⁴ Sykes’s view of Anglican authority did not intensify the assertion of clerical or hierarchical power over a passive church membership; on the contrary it assumed a complex, distributed, accountable series of relationships between all levels and offices in the Church.

Rather, the difficulty lies in the recurrent problem, of which Sykes was clearly well aware, of uniting in one field of enquiry both the historical apprehension of change in the life of the Church, and the critical theological justification and evaluation of change. Two of the central elements of Sykes’s reflections on Anglicanism, to which I drew attention at the beginning, are especially pertinent here – his attempt to evaluate doctrine as an integral part of the total life of the Church, and his interest in the essence of Christianity. The first I have called his reflection on doctrine as ecclesial practice. Perhaps unconsciously echoing a growing (through the 70s and 80s) contemporary dissatisfaction in the social sciences with the dichotomies commonly associated with Marxism, such as base/superstructure, and ideology/social relations, Sykes argued beyond the assumption that change in the Church was

³⁴ Roberts, ‘Lord, Bondsman and Churchman’, pp. 160-1. To demonstrate this would require a paper of its own, but it’s worth pointing out briefly: i) *kenosis* was not a theme of first- or even second-generation Tractarianism (taking Liddon for example as second-generation), and did not coincide with the intensifying of the emphasis on clerical authority associated with the Tractarians; ii) Gore and his ‘Liberal Catholic’ contemporaries were influenced as much by ‘representative’ theories of the ministry as by the historical, ‘pipeline’ theory of Newman *et al.*; iii) *kenosis* has remained a controverted trope in Anglican theology, and in the hands of some of its most ardent defenders (e.g. Donald MacKinnon) was actually coupled with a forceful anticlericalism; v) there are many good grounds for doubting current opinion about modern Anglican neglect of the laity.

an ideational process, a result simply of theologians moving the goalposts; it was instead highly complex, a multi-dimensional and reciprocal process in which theology itself was one amongst a number of pertinent factors, though of course a supremely important source and norm. In *Power* (2006), he referred approvingly to Quentin Skinner's reformulation of the history and methodology of political thought by close attention to the political and social contexts in which the theorizing of political problems first took place.³⁵ It is arguable that historical theology has yet to catch up with the methodological shift represented by this Cambridge school of political thought. Sykes, however, could not be accused of lacking insight into the problem. What *The Integrity of Anglicanism* presupposed was not the systematization of a quasi-confessional position, but rather the critical discernment and articulation of a theological position embedded in the life of the Church – what it says about itself and its beliefs, how it worships, how it is structured, how it regulates itself, and so on. And since these things change over time, the question of what is Anglican identity must be perforce a historical question. That is why, in *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, he says the Doctrine Commission teaches the faith 'from within the Church of England', i.e. an actual historical church.³⁶ It is why, in *Unashamed Anglicanism*, he could speak of the 'common worship' of the Church as 'the educational matrix for the reading and the teaching of the Scriptures'.³⁷ It is why, in *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, he could argue that recognizing the Church of England had a 'regulated doctrinal structure in the context of its liturgy' was not a way of 'smuggling in a uniform confessional stance by the back door', since there remained a freedom of interpretation of texts, and the 'multiplicity' of modern Anglican service books

³⁵ S.W. Sykes, *Power and Christian Theology* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 155 n.22, referring to Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

³⁶ *Contemporary Doctrine Classics*, p. xvi.

³⁷ Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, p. xviii.

actually included ‘some doctrinal variety’.³⁸ It is ironic that Sykes’s criticism of F.D. Maurice in *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, for all that I share his perplexity at some of Maurice’s contradictory formulations, nonetheless missed something he actually shared with Maurice, namely a concern not to expound a theoretical Anglicanism from first principles, but to give a theological account of the Church as it existed in time, in other words a reflexive rather than constructive move.³⁹

But such a reflexive move can only with difficulty articulate general principles to adjudicate on what is or is not a legitimate application of the Gospel. I’m touching here on a vast and persistent problem in Christian theology, the relation of history and theology. Sykes plainly was intrigued by Newman’s formulation of the idea of the development of doctrine. But however influential and appealing Newman’s general argument has been in modern theology, capturing as it does the historicist perception that ideas somehow both remain the same in essence, but also change radically in their reception and field of reference, nonetheless no one has formulated satisfactorily an actual set of criteria by which one might decisively determine what is and what is not a ‘legitimate’ development of the Gospel. All attempts to do so have produced proposals that themselves remain the subject of argument and criticism. And yet the possibility of development presupposes what I have just hinted at – namely the existence of an essence, of a fundamental set of beliefs that decisively constitute the core of Christian faith. And here of course we bump up awkwardly against the internal diversity of Anglican convictions. As soon as we try to define the whole field of Anglican belief, and suppose that it is a stable, uncontested field, we falter.

³⁸ Sykes, *Integrity*, p. 47.

³⁹ As I have argued in *F.D. Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority*, pp. 55-97 (an interpretation of *The Kingdom of Christ*), & 201 (specific comments on Stephen Sykes’s reading).

Sykes's early book *Christian Theology Today* (1971) is telling in this respect. Coming from a theologian who was to become a diocesan bishop, and chairman of the Doctrine Commission, the interplay between the perspective of the church leader and that of the theologian in the early chapters – and especially the chapter 'The validity of conservatism' – makes for fascinating reading even today. Indeed the whole book remains a brilliant exposition of the difficulties of encompassing a decisive judgement on theological truth within a religious tradition which was, and is, almost irreducibly, internally complex or pluriform. The theologian, Sykes implies in his reading of the origins of liberalism, has to reckon with the growing threat to traditional statements of authority represented by the rise of modern science and critical philosophies associated with it. Now if this inclines us to think that his view is of its age, the early 1970s, and therefore a little too much captive to the seemingly relentless advance of liberalism, still it's good to remember that he was aware of the limitations of his own argument, for as he admits, 'the history of the last 300 years of theology has numerous examples of theologians who jumped on the bandwagon of the latest scientific hypothesis only to find themselves in the knacker's yard'.⁴⁰ And so, in contrast, he could claim 'The Church has every reason to be conservative.'⁴¹ But this is not quite what it seems. For 'the Church' here can mean different things to different people – its officials and formal gatherings, for an easy curse perhaps, or 'the body of Christians...through which the grace of Christ is made available to us'.⁴² The leadership may be conservative – they do not wish to be led off to the knacker's yard – but they cannot prejudice the attitude and decisions of every member of the Church. And so church leaders 'must be expected to be cautious in

⁴⁰ S.W. Sykes, *Christian Theology Today* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1971), p. 24.

⁴¹ Sykes, *Christian Theology Today*, p. 25.

⁴² Sykes, *Christian Theology Today*, p. 28.

matters which concern the witness of Christians to the truth of the Gospel – in a word, we cannot expect Church leadership to be theologically radical’.⁴³ Here, in a nutshell, was the finely-balanced appreciation of the dual, sometimes competing vocations of theologian and church leader which runs through much of Sykes’s work. Already here you can see the origins of the train of thought that was to lead to *The Integrity of Anglicanism*. *Christian Theology Today* is a reflection on the problem of unity in pluriformity, and on the corresponding difficulties of resolving what the Church is, or ought to be, in the face of the compelling evidence that Christians have never displayed uniformity of belief or function, and never will. That reflection was to be carried further in *The Identity of Christianity* (1984).

Attention to the essence of Christianity stemmed first and foremost from Sykes’s original work on Schleiermacher, and the nineteenth and early twentieth century development of that theme was what preoccupied him in *Christian Theology Today* and *The Identity of Christianity*. But he was particularly interested in its Anglican treatment, and was at pains to point out that it was Richard Hooker who, almost certainly, was the first writer in English to use the term.⁴⁴ And it was William Sherlock whose formulation he quoted – evidently with approval – in his essay on ‘The Fundamentals of Christianity’ in *The Study of Anglicanism*:

A fundamental doctrine is such a doctrine as is in strict sense of the *essence* of Christianity, without which the whole building and superstructure must fall; the belief

⁴³ Sykes, *Christian Theology Today*, pp. 28-9.

⁴⁴ Sykes, *Identity of Christianity*, p. 106.

of which is necessary to the very being of Christianity, like the *first principles* of any art or science.⁴⁵

As he indicated in *The Identity of Christianity*, the whole principle of the Henrician reformation ‘rested on Melancthon’s doctrine of *adiaphora*’ which, as eventually extended, could include ‘all the non-scriptural elements of Roman practice...which might quite properly be varied from place to place and time to time’.⁴⁶ But even Sykes’s careful and deceptively learned exposition of this tradition in the end had to admit that ‘there is no common agreement about what the fundamentals are’, and no agreed rule ‘for determining what they are’.⁴⁷

Therein lies the whole problem. Ecumenical commitments, and the natural desire to promote the unity and mission of the Church at all levels, demand that an account be given of what is and what is not of the essence of the Church.⁴⁸ As Anglicans stand four-square within the Church and, as Sykes says, the Church of England, consistent with a long and distinguished tradition, insists that other Churches, ‘including trinitarian non-episcopal Churches, really participate in the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church of Christ’, they too must be able to give an account of what is and what is not of the essence of the Church.⁴⁹ Any discussion of Anglican identity must begin from that point. In their willingness to take

⁴⁵ S.W. Sykes & J. Booty (eds.), *The Study of Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1988), p. 238; italics original.

⁴⁶ Sykes, *Identity of Christianity*, p. 106.

⁴⁷ Sykes & Booty, *Study of Christianity*, p. 242.

⁴⁸ I am aware that, like Sykes himself, in this account I moved seamlessly from the essence of Christianity to the essence of the Church. Is there a distinction? They are clearly related, but the question raises complex issues about the relation of faith and order that lie beyond the scope of this article. [Insert cross-reference here?]

⁴⁹ Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, p. 135.

the hard road towards paying attention to what constitutes their theological identity, Anglicans need to register the double sense of the word ‘integrity’ – an internal wholeness or coherence, and plain honesty.⁵⁰ Yet no Anglican writer, or authoritative figure, has comprehensively and decisively described in what particular manner this internal coherence can be determined.

But this is only to point up a difficulty, not to disable an approach. Anglicanism’s constantly evanescent identity is something at once historically contingent and nonetheless real and substantial. It is precisely in the attempt, however flawed, to articulate what makes Anglicans ‘Anglican’, that in practical terms the fault-line I’ve identified can be negotiated. It seems to me that Sykes’s work can be interpreted as having made a definite move in that direction: it’s hard to think of any other systematic theologian who in principle was so ready to take Anglican history seriously, and who was so alert to the complexity of that history. Perhaps an exception would be Dan Hardy, whose work – albeit in a very different way – similarly was suffused with a sense that a theological account could be given of the life of the Church in time.⁵¹

The difficulty does not negate the fact that Sykes’s contribution to Anglican self-understanding was of first importance. One cannot but wonder what he would have made of the current crisis of the Communion – a far greater crisis than the one he described in *The Integrity of Anglicanism* - in which we see the global colossus that the worldwide

⁵⁰ Cf. Sykes, *Integrity*, pp. 1-2.

⁵¹ See especially the essays gathered in D.W. Hardy, *Finding the Church. The Dynamic Truth of Anglicanism* (London: SCM, 2001).

Communion had become crumbling under the impact of arguments about Scripture, tradition and human sexuality and sexual identity, like an iceberg crumbling under the impact of global warming. His later writings – his intriguing essay on Richard Hooker and the ordination of women, for example – give hints of ways in which his argument could be extended to new situations.⁵² But it is a pity that relatively little of this writing – with the exception of passages in the Doctrine Commission report *Being Human* – explicitly addressed the ethical issues that now divide the Communion, and how they should be handled.

What were, finally, the outstanding features of Sykes's reflections on Anglican identity? This is not an easy question to answer, because his contribution was extensive and multifaceted. It was, first and foremost, a work of decisive destruction. He ended forever the bland and self-satisfied language of mid-century Anglican apologetic. He gave Anglicans a hard lesson in ecumenical humility, and assisted the adaptation of English Anglicanism in particular to the new world of post-colonialism and of a free and Christianly expanding global south. This, in a sense, 'pluralised' Anglican studies. *The Study of Anglicanism*, though not the very first of its kind, set a trend for the multi-dimensional, multi-authored, multi-contextual study of the phenomenon that is worldwide Anglicanism, and that is a path Anglican studies still follows today.⁵³

⁵² Sykes, *Unashamed Anglicanism*, pp. 81-98.

⁵³ Cf. for example, I.S. Markham, J.B. Hawkins IV, J. Terry, & L.N. Steffensen (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to the Anglican Communion* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), & M.D. Chapman, S. Clarke & M. Percy (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglican Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

But I'd also pick out more specifically, and in relation to issues of Anglican theology, four summary points. First, without question he complicated questions of identity, and showed how intricately related theology, polity, liturgy, devotion and practice really were. Second, and with comparable vehemence, he advanced the cause of the proper study of systematic theology by Anglicans, both for its own sake and as part of their critical interpretation of their own tradition. As he said in *The Integrity of Anglicanism*, criticism 'is essential to the health of a church', and the readiness for criticism with openness to change provided an 'educational matrix for the nurture of Christian character', for 'Every aspect of church life is involved in this educative process, doctrines and liturgies, ceremonial, architecture and ancillary services.'⁵⁴ Third, in particular he re-focused Anglican minds on the question of ecclesiology, broadening it out from the narrower, High Church preoccupation with order, and particularly episcopacy and succession, and relating it more closely to Biblical and systematic theology. He implied that this broader Anglican ecclesiology was yet to be articulated as clearly as it might, but in that highly suggestive essay, 'Foundations of an Anglican Ecclesiology' he picked out baptism as particularly significant for an Anglican ecclesiology, given Anglicanism's breadth of ecumenical engagement. Others – notably Paul Avis – have of course continued and developed that emphasis.⁵⁵ Fourth, and finally, recognition of conflict and change in the Church led Sykes into a particular interest in authority in Anglicanism, and into an attempt to articulate a theologically-responsible account of ecclesial power and its relation to the one authority that springs from the one God, though it is multiple in its embodiment in different institutions and offices of the Church.

⁵⁴ Sykes, *Integrity*, pp. 48-9.

⁵⁵ Cf. Avis, *The Identity of Anglicanism*, pp. 109-17.

Thus the crisis of Anglican identity we are experiencing today is not the one Sykes confronted. The threat of a second wave of Anglican modernism, with its Christological radicalism, has long receded. The Communion is fractured today by a crisis of ethics and order that was on the horizon in the 1990s and gathering momentum in the early 2000s, but which intensified precisely at the moment Sykes's active participation in Church of England and Communion-wide affairs was drawing to an end. Yet his conception of the field remains challenging and pertinent.